



# COMMONWEALTH of VIRGINIA

## *Department of Veterans Services*

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Commissioner

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### **Virginia Department of Veterans Services Update for Board of Veterans Services June 10, 2020**

Since the last meeting of the Board of Veterans Services, the Virginia Department of Veterans Services (VDVS) has undergone a significant amount of change. VDVS remains committed to serving veterans and families and we've seen some outstanding innovation throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department transitioned to an all mostly remote operations model to protect employees and clients:

- Benefit and veteran/family support services are being provided virtually through email, telephone, and USPS. Claims filing and processing has continued. We have seen a noticeable decrease in the number of clients assisted, especially for Virginia Veteran and Family Support (VVFS). In addition, community resources have been in a constant state of flux making care coordination more difficult.
- State cemetery operations followed National Cemetery Administration (NCA) guidelines to provide only direct interments with no more than 10 people allowed to view the burial at the cemetery. Since committal services and military honors were put on hold in accordance with NCA guidelines, we have seen a 20% drop in interments.
- The interior sections of the Virginia War Memorial have been closed to the public, although many continue to visit the exterior portions of the Memorial. The Virginia War Memorial hosted a Memorial Day observance that was broadcast on television in Richmond and Hampton Roads, in addition to being livestreamed. Nielsen ratings and livestream counts indicate that at least 37,000 viewers saw the ceremony.
- Operations at the Veteran Care Centers have continued, but they have been closed to visitors and family visits. At Sitter & Barfoot Veterans Care Center, one resident and five staff tested positive for COVID-19. At Virginia Veterans Care Center, one staff contracted the virus.
- Education, transition and employment services have continued, although the VETE team switched to providing virtual services. Transition services and V3 certification are seeing substantial interest from clients. The transition assistance team coordinated with the Virginia

Chamber on one hiring fair, with a 2<sup>nd</sup> being held on 10 June. The Military Medics and Corpsmen (MMAC) program continues in full force and hiring numbers are consistent with pre-COVID levels.

- The Virginia Women Veterans Summit (June 17-19) will be held virtually.
- State Approving Agency (GI Bill program certification) in-person compliance surveys were placed on hold. Some schools have scheduled remote surveys (optional).
- We are experiencing a robust number of Virginia Military Survivors and Dependents Education Program (VMSDEP) applications.

We are ready to execute our return to providing face-to-face services. Below is our timeline:

- In stages, Benefit and VVFS offices will begin to see veterans and families through appointments starting on June 29. We will start with offices in which social distancing protocols and PPE are readily implemented, allowing us to learn lessons for the more challenging offices (those with physical distancing and extensive employee health concerns).
- Cemeteries will hold committal services starting on June 22.
- The Virginia War Memorial will open its interior displays to the public on June 29.

The following items are important considerations as we move forward:

- Working through the challenges of restarting our face-to-face services provision with new requirements (appointments, PPE, and hygiene/disinfecting protocols).
- Rebuilding community relationships since those require regular face-to-face interactions.
- Updating our technology: there are applications which can make us more efficient.
- Examine policy changes that may benefit VDVS' provision of services.
- Manage any budget shortfalls that may be created by the COVID 19 pandemic.

We are developing a communication strategy that focuses are five lines of effort:

- Generationally appropriate themes and methods
- Increase the VDVS digital footprint
- Building upon relationships with media and stakeholders
- Targeted marketing and communication plans
- Develop an agency of brand ambassadors

The Virginia Department of Veterans Services is open to feedback and we look forward to collaborating with the Board of Veterans Services and other stakeholders to improve outreach and offerings to Virginia's veterans and their families.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J Maxwell". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

John Maxwell